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Contested e-literacies in Dutch as a Second Language: Exploring the Interface between Policy and ICT Practices

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Abstract

Building on an overview of the history of civic integration policy in the Netherlands, we show how – parallel to the development of a stricter integration policy – we see an exponential growth of ICT in the Dutch as a second language sector. While ICT used to be a means for learning support in second language classrooms, it seems to have become a key factor for the newly arrived migrant to manage his own learning and integration. This stress laid on ICT, though, impinges upon (low-educated) migrants as a new obstacle where it is the being literate the precondition upon which someone becomes more easily integrated and through that can stay. To back this claim, our contribution looks at ICT applications and at how they get picked up – or else – by learners. The contribution concludes denouncing that the transformational power of ICT is institutionally adopted in integration classes in that it serves the purpose of becoming a fast track lane for integration exams. The paradoxes emerged from the learner's view, however, stress that the diversity of migrants' own learning development requires diversity in and reflection on 'self-teaching devices' when ICT applications are brought into classes on the basis of policy requirements.

1. Introduction

Until the end of the nineties of the last century, preservation of one's first language and culture was part of the official Dutch integration policies as guest workers were expected to return to their home countries. Many migrants, however, did actually attend (literacy) courses in Dutch as a second language, provided by adult education centres. In several places, these centres also offered basic literacy courses in Turkish or Arabic; learning to read was considered to be easier in a first language and learning Dutch as a second language was thought to be more successful if people had already learned to read in their first language. To illustrate the above into first-hand experience: the first request Tilburg University received in 1984 from the Dutch State Secretary of Education posed the question why learning Dutch was so laborious for unschooled migrants and asked us to investigate whether it would be more effective to start their education with learning to read and write in their first language. Starting in 1998, however, an official integration policy coupled up with compulsory attendance legislation came into force. At policy level, things took a further and even more severe twist of hand from 2007 onwards. In that year, the Civic Integration policy of the Dutch government had developed from a more or less foreigner-friendly policy, which supported migrants in building a new life in the Netherlands, to a much more restrictive policy armour, which required migrants mainly from non-western countries to first pass several exams even before getting access to the Netherlands, and once entered to acquire Dutch further for permanent residence and citizenship. This rigid policing is very telling. It illustrates that, as in other European countries, proficiency in the national language has more and more become a cornerstone of national integration policy and with that it has been elected as a symbol of loyalty from the guest toward the host country. According to the latest amendments to language-related legislation, in order to access the Netherlands, applicants not only must have acquired some spoken Dutch and knowledge of Dutch society, but also some reading ability in Dutch. It is clear therefore that for either unschooled or low-educated migrants, this measure means that proving their linguistic competence depends on literacy skills, literacy skills that they neither have nor can easily learn. We now move to explore how the ICT sector responded from having to find learning supports that readily helped the newly arrived migrant in their move along a continuum that goes from being a foreigner to becoming an integrated, self-supported citizen.

2. ICT and Dutch as a second language

Until 2007, municipalities had mainly relied on Regional Educational Centres (ROCs) to cater for the integration of newly arrived migrants. As we have mentioned above though, it is from 2007 onwards that an entire market developed around civic integration education starts to expand exponentially. Municipalities, in fact, often put integration projects out to tender, for which parties were invited to submit financially competitive bids. From 2010, instead, the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment was the institutional body in charge of the civic integration of newly arrived migrants (see

Spotti and Kurvers 2012). The Ministry actively supervised municipal authorities engaged in implementing its integration policy. Municipal authorities, in turn, supplied information to newly arrived migrants about their integration trajectory, its cost and funding, and its length. They would also either cover or subsidize applicants' integration costs for both courses and examinations and were responsible for applying financial sanctions on those migrants who either did not attend or who did not manage to complete an integration course within the 3.5 year timespan set for a full integration certificate. As a result of these policy moves, there has been a wide variety of L2 computer mediated learning materials being produced from 2007 onwards. These materials ranged from general language courses to separate tools that have been developed to practice specific language skills, such as listening, grammar and pronunciation for particular groups of students, e.g., highly educated migrants who can function as independent learners. In 2010 '*Knowledge of the Dutch society*' (often found under the acronym of KNS) became a compulsory part of the civic integration examination, and its content often became integrated with those of Dutch as L2 courses (see Kurvers and Spotti, *forthcoming*), both of which would claim to make use of ICTs.

It is with this fast evolving landscape as backdrop, that a study initiated in 2010 took stock of the applications available on the ICT for integration market and decided to examine their characteristics in terms of learner friendliness, innovative spirit, inclusion of daily life practices and feedback, ultimately trying to provide an insight into the drivers and barriers of ICT for the learning of the language of the host country from third country nationals only recently arrived to the Netherlands. The first issue that had to be tackled was indeed how to define ICT and how ICT was defined by the institutional bodies that were managing integration. The definition of ICT used by the Ministry as well as by other educational establishments, however, resulted to be very broad and it opened itself to criticism. In fact, an 'ICT-assisted method for integration' in the definition of the Ministerial authorities resulted to cover any product that could store, retrieve or transmit information in a digital format. The study from which this article reflects upon based itself on the working definition adopted by the Ministry but before selecting applications to be investigated more closely, it took into consideration the full range of ICT tools, courses and applications available on the market back in 2010. That is, it ranged from those materials that were more traditional in that mainly paper based teaching methods that also contained computer-assisted training materials (i.e., a CD-ROM or a DVD) to more innovative web-based learning materials with an online component. The range of ICT products for L2 learning in the Netherlands extends from small-scale applications for specific purposes or skills to complete courses that cover all language skills across different domains, such as work, education, recreation and childrearing. 2010 was a point when the Dutch government was promoting the use of ICT in L2 learning for integration, and it was the government which specified the targets that should be attained through the use of ICT. The opening of the market to commercial parties, as the study we carried out revealed, led to the development and identification of a wealth of digital materials, most of which came at a cost for students, and it highlighted that an ICT commercial market was more favorable to those newly arrived migrants who had financial resources other than those provided by municipal authorities, and who could therefore afford to pay for extra tuition (see Spotti 2011). From this overview, the study from 2010 had selected three applications (See Driessen *et al.* 2011). The first application was selected for the research because of its widespread use across integration courses, and because it represents the earliest of steps toward digital learning for Dutch as a second language. The second application was selected because of its prize-winning innovative approach to integration through blended learning and because it embodied a consolidating trend in the field, that of contextualized second language learning. The third instead was selected because it was then representative of an emerging trend – that of adaptive learning – which had not yet spread widely across civic integration classes.

3. The interface between policy and ICT practices

The three applications examined demonstrated the emergence of a number of features that characterized ICT and Dutch as second language learning. The first is the continuously evolving face of ICT. The first application showed an example of digitalised learning, the second of contextualizing learning, and the third, and back then most recent, of adaptive learning. There is also the co-option of ICT into a particular institutional discourse. This relates to a tendency to respond to cultural and linguistic diversity and difference from the mainstream by developing a culture of drilling and control over someone's identity and someone's conduct in society. In this account language learning and learning mainstream norms and values are viewed as pivotal to success in the host culture. While such a reaction may be difficult to avoid, we need to bear in mind that ICT is not a fast track to integration. We also bear in mind that migration can no longer be considered as a linear move from home country A to host country B, and with no further links to country A. It is thanks in part to ICT,



indeed, that migrant networks have become more mobile, and less anchored to the host country, rendering integration a flexible and dynamic activity. As Snyder and Prinsloo (2007:174) warn us, the logic of bridging the gap in the digital divide often 'overemphasizes the importance of the physical presence of computers and connectivity to the exclusion of other factors that allow people to use electronic media for meaningful ends. In acknowledging this, educators and policy-makers alike still need to be aware of classroom processes and of differences in literacy and e-literacy competence among migrant language learners. They still need to ask: 'is this application too inaccessible for a student?' 'What does this tell me about what the student can realistically achieve?' and – in terms of learning through ICT: 'what has my student actually learnt from the application, through the clicking, through the feedback received?' This insight leaves us with one last consideration to be made. No set of rules and procedures can solve the personal linguistic, cultural and ethical dilemmas people face in their lives as migrants: they can only highlight them. What is needed, in our view, is a profound reflection on the ethics of what is asked of migrants, of how authorities engage in relationships of trust and fostering of civic responsibility with newcomers. There are forces in society that define living in a receiving country as a purely professional set of activities, revolving around clear lists of procedures and standardized criteria of performance, and assessment as focusing upon the replication of uniform patterns of conduct that lead to integration. This view is weak and its weaknesses are eloquently demonstrated every day.

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